

SYSTEM AND METHOD FOR AN INDEPENDENT RETAILER BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS MARKET EXCHANGE

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II. FIELD OF THE INVENTION

This invention relates to system and method for an independent retailer business-to-business market exchange.

15 **III. BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION**

The emerging e-commerce technologies, the utility of the internet, and the need to have a business model that is able to use these two catalysts to serve the needs of the independent retailer is combined with the identification, development, and enablement of products and services required for efficient
20 operation throughout the supply chain of this industry.

IV. SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Accordingly, the invention includes a business model and intellectual property around the development of that model. The method comprises business

model development and hardware and software integration with a wide variety of existing individual and legacy ERP systems.

The method was discovered in part by identifying key behavioral components of the independent retailing sector, its supply chain, and various participants. The invention includes the subsequent development of processes, hardware and software to address the current and future gaps in that industry. The method can be implemented in various embodiments by matching those key components with emerging technology products for implementation and integration. The evolution of the described business model or "Relationship Trade Exchange" is unique. The five elements of the business model as described, their relationship, combination and many ways in which they can be utilized in whole, part, or various combinations by participants of the "RTE" is the competitive advantage of this business model.

In one embodiment, the invention is a method of facilitating operations of a plurality of Independent Retailers ("IR's"), said method comprising: communicating over a network from a service bureau or a plurality of headquarters of a chain of retail stores to their respective IR's; displaying to said IR's a plurality of services for said IR's, for said IR's to select at least one service, wherein said services comprise procurement; receiving over said network a message from at least one of said IR's to its respective headquarters or a service bureau showing said at least one selected service from said at least one store; and serving up to said IR's said at least one selected service.

The invention also includes a system configured to implement the above-described method. In one embodiment the invention includes a system for managing a plurality of chains of IR's, said system comprising: communication means for communicating over a network from a plurality of headquarters of a chain of IR's to a plurality of said IR's; displaying means for displaying to said IR's a plurality of services for said IR's, and configured to

allow said IR's to select at least one service, wherein said services comprise promotion ordering; receiving means for receiving over said network a message from at least one of said IR's to each respective headquarters showing said at least one selected service from said at least one store; and
5 server means for serving up to said IR's said at least one selected service.

These and other features and advantages of the present invention will be made more apparent through a consideration of the following detailed description of a preferred embodiment of the invention. In the course of this description, frequent reference will be made to the attached drawings.

10 V. BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a schematic conceptual diagram showing the key components of one embodiment of the invention and their interrelationships.

FIG. 2 has call outs describing each element of the invention depicted in Fig. 1.

15 FIG. 3 is a schematic system diagram of one embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 4 is a schematic block system level 0 flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 5A is a schematic block process flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the Brand Deployment aspect of the invention.

20 FIG. 5B is a schematic block process flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the Promotions System aspect of the Brand Deployment aspect of the invention.

FIG. 6 is a schematic block system flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the Marketplace aspect of the invention.

FIG. 7 is a schematic block system flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the Customer Service aspect of the invention.

FIG. 8 is a schematic block system flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the Business Operating Systems aspect of the invention.

- 5 FIG. 9A is a schematic block system flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the Communities aspect of the invention.

FIG. 9B is a schematic block system flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the Existing Communities System of the Communities aspect of the invention.

- 10 FIG 9C illustrates the display of a web page, typically a home page, showing typical components for creating the Community.

FIG. 10 is a block system diagram showing one preferred embodiment of specific applications and their interrelationships.

VI. DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

A. Overview of Invention and Its Utility and Benefits and Advantages

- 15 The invention is the first Internet trade exchange designed as a full-service marketplace for all convenience store and small business retailers and their suppliers. The "independent retail sector" as used in this specification and appended claims means retailers that are: (a) franchised and/or independently owned and/or independently operated (collectively "IRs"), and
- 20 (b) suppliers of good and/or services to IRs and such suppliers' company owned and/or operated stores (collectively "IR Sector"). Examples of IRs include, but are not limited to: 7-11™ brand retailers, Integrated gasoline and convenience retailers, Dry Cleaners, and Theatre Owners.

The invention incorporates a proprietary Internet-based retail business model and the world-class fulfillment and distribution network, e.g., of McLane Company.

5 The invention, an independent, open marketplace, will offer a variety of e-commerce services to all other trading partners in the IR Sector (and optionally other sectors). The founders would each hold equity interest in the system of the invention (optionally implemented initially by a company named, e.g., "RetailersMarketXchange.com"). Optionally, retailers and suppliers who
10 commit capital and participation will also be equity participants in the joint venture, which at inception would be the world's largest web-based business-to-business marketplace for the IR Sector.

The new marketplace intends to be the catalyst for revolutionizing the supply chain to the highly fragmented convenience store ("C-store") and other segments of the small business sector and IR Sector. For suppliers, the
15 marketplace has the potential to dramatically reduce costs in this \$200 billion-a-year industry, to improve the marketing reach and effectiveness, and the efficiency of delivering products and services. For IRs, it creates access to the suppliers, programs and scale of a networked economy to dramatically improve their operations.

20 In one preferred embodiment implementation of the invention, a new web-based marketplace will optionally initially focus on convenience store retailers, providing them with the means to achieve significant cost savings and revenue generation. The service may be personalized from the retailer's point of view, combining the dynamic marketplace of a trade exchange with
25 specialized software and services that deliver the brands, business systems, customer services and community networking that convenience store and small retailers need to run their business. The portal will include:

- A marketplace providing an unparalleled commerce community between supplier companies, retailer chains and individual retailers.

- The infrastructure for deployment of retail and product brand information and programs.
 - Customer services to enable the transformation to a new, more efficient business.
- 5 • Business operating systems that enable the full use of RetailersMarketXchange.com and integrate the retailer's onsite operations with those of the suppliers.
- A dynamic, interactive online community network where retailers and suppliers can collaborate and share information.
- 10 RetailersMarketXchange.com is optionally based on a conventional eCommerce catalog and order processing system, e.g., on the Oracle e-business platform and the Oracle Exchange software suite, which enables Internet supply chain networks to dramatically increase purchasing and operating efficiencies. With, e.g., the Oracle CRM suite, the exchange will be
- 15 well suited to the unique needs of the convenience and small business retailer, based on the experiences gained from the Chevron Retailer Alliance business model. Optimization of supply-chain fulfillment and distribution will optionally be leveraged off utilizing technology and systems existing in the IR Sector as presently practiced by distributors in the IR Sector, e.g., the McLane
- 20 Company.

The Internet-based system will significantly reduce operating costs, transform business processes, and establish a platform for growth for independent retailers. The marketplace of the invention will greatly enhance supply chain efficiencies between retailers and suppliers and with all of their

25 manufacturers, distributors and retailing partners. Existing electronic point of sale technology may optionally be employed for inventory and ordering management, e.g., as available from Professional Datasolutions Inc.

This marketplace of the invention will provide advantages to the retail supply chain to the convenience and small business retailing sector around the power of the Internet. This would be a win for all parts of the independent retailers' channels.

- 5 Benefits for the retailer of the system and method of the invention include making it easy for the independent retailer to do business. The diverse offerings of Business Operating Systems components of the invention (ASP offerings of scanning, accounting, labor scheduling, inventory control, network management, etc.), the ITE component of the invention allows purchase of
- 10 commodity goods, and the Brand Deployment component of the invention allows deployment of respective brand requirements, all supported by personalized Customer Services in the Customer Service component of the invention, make the system of the invention the place where Independent Retailers will want to do all their business.
- 15 The system of the invention creates new value for the retailer. It allows for an increase in store margin due to increased sales and efficiencies, increased access to programs and promotions, decreased cost of goods sold, and decreased site and network operating expense.

- The system of the invention creates community for the Retailers. It allows
- 20 Retailers to be part of a community where they can share ideas and hook up with a diversity of groups they may find of interest.

- Benefits for the Suppliers include: New Customers via increased marketing reach and productivity; Increased Sales via targeted sales and promotional capabilities; Reduced Costs via optimized manufacturing and distribution,
- 25 more efficient order placement and inventory management, and reduced catalog maintenance costs; Powerful New Data for aiding Supply Chain optimization and for Market and Customer research and Strategy Development.

B. Main Components

The major components/modules/functionality/services of the system and method of the invention are briefly described below.

The Brand Deployment aspect of the invention will provide the efficient
5 deployment of unique and proprietary brand elements to the field organization
and Retail and Product brands. This sub-system permits a parent, or
headquarters, or franchiser to deploy multiple special promotions through its
IR or franchisees. (1) That is, the parent enters into special favorable short-
10 term purchasing agreements with a manufacturer or distributor to purchase its
products through the IR's. The IR's learn about the promotions through the
Brand Deployment sub-system of the invention. The IR's may select which
promotions they sign up for and place an order for the desired quantities
directly from the distributor or manufacturer. (2) Additionally, specific
15 business transactions such as invoicing and price notifications unique to that
brand can be deployed directly to franchisees through this component.
(3) Other brand specific information such as image guidelines, corporate
standards, company communication, etc., can also be securely deployed to
employees and franchisees of that brand through the brand deployment
sub-system. Brands using this component may be a retail chain, a franchiser,
20 a distributor or manufacturer. Shipment tracking and payment processing are
optional features of the Brand Deployment sub-system.

The Independent Trade Exchange aspect of the invention will provide the
open marketplace where buyers and suppliers come to transact commodity
and auction based items. Optionally, leveraged or aggregated buying power
25 is a function of the system and method of the invention, i.e., IRs group
purchases together to obtain volume discounts from suppliers. The goods
and services of all distributors, manufacturers, and all other goods and service
providers on the RetailersMarketXchange will be placed in a
eCatalog/database. The eCatalog will be searchable and accessible to the
30 IR's, within optional access rights limits for each user. During the log-in

process, the IR's preferred suppliers will be identified and optionally a dynamically created report will be displayed showing those preferred suppliers and any special pricing agreements between the IR and supplier. Optionally, all or some alternative transaction types are supported, e.g., auction, reverse-
5 auction, request-for-proposal, request-for-bid, aggregated buying, and dutch auction. Order processing, shipment tracking and payment processing are optional supported features of the Independent Trade Exchange sub-system of the invention. An optional automated replenishment system permits automated reordering without human intervention. This is based on user
10 established business rules, e.g., minimum inventory levels and standard reorder quantities.

The Business Operating Systems aspect of the invention will provide the hardware and software that allows automation, efficiency, and dynamic response to enable the business environment of Independent Retailers at the
15 store level. This will include an Application Service Provider service whereby IR's may "rent" a business application on a subscription or per use basis and thereby have benefit of top of the line, up to date business applications without the full cost of a internal license, maintenance, installation, and updating. Downloading applications and entering into the appropriate license
20 is another option.

The Customer Services aspect of the invention will provide the human touch that enables the transformation of the Independent Retailer and is the problem solver, business consultant, and partner in an increasingly automated, e-driven environment. All users of the RetailersMarketXchange
25 will have access to the Customer Services sub-system either on-line, by way of telephone, or both. On-site customer service is optionally provided. The services provided by the Customer Services sub-system optionally include user training, troubleshooting, help desk functions, and account history records. Optionally, the frame on each screen will include a Customer

Service button whereby the user may at any time select the button to launch an email window for sending inquiries to Customer Service.

For the suppliers, Customer Service optionally includes a targeted advertising campaign service for suppliers' goods, services and/or promotions.

- 5 The Communities aspect of the invention will provide the fun, dynamic, interactive participant driven element that facilitates ideas, discussion and partnership with other members of the exchange. The Communities sub-system will include topic-specific newsgroups, member-clubs, bulletin boards, and other on-line community features. This component will be very
- 10 flexible, e.g., users can participate in an existing user group or create a new one. The groups may use secure on non-secure communications. All participants in the RetailersMarketXchange may access the communities component. It may be used for collaborative planning, design and development of promotions, products, and/or services. The Communities
- 15 sub-system is optionally utilized for consumer research and feedback to the manufacturers.

C. Detailed Description of the Figures

- A detailed description of each process/means block follows. Each block, separately or in combination, is alternatively computer implemented, computer
- 20 assisted, and/or human implemented. Computer implementation optionally includes one or more conventional general purpose computers having a processor, memory, storage, input devices, output devices and/or conventional networking devices, protocols, and/or conventional client-server hardware and software. Where any block or combination of blocks is
- 25 computer implemented, it is done optionally by conventional means, whereby one skilled in the art of computer implementation could utilize conventional algorithms, components, and devices to implement the requirements and design of the invention provided herein.

FIG. 1 is a schematic conceptual diagram showing the key components of one embodiment of the invention and their interrelationships. The interconnectivity of each component is represented by the overlapping circles 101. The functionality of this interconnectivity is further discussed below in the description of Figure 4. The figure depicts aspects of the invention of a relationship based portal that revolutionizes the Independent Retailing Sector. It combines the strengths of an Independent Trade Exchange module 110 with Brand Deployment module 130, Business Operating Systems module 125, Customer Services module 115, and Community module 115.

- FIG. 2 has call outs referencing implementation means 135 – 155 for each module of the invention depicted in Fig. 1. Community module 115 includes the fun, dynamic, interactive participant driven element that facilitates ideas, discussion and partnership with other members of the exchange. Customer Services module 115 includes the human touch that enables the transformation of the Independent Retailer and is the problem solver, business consultant, and partner in an increasingly automated, e-driven environment. Independent Trade Exchange module 110 includes the open marketplace where buyers and suppliers come to transact commodity and auction based items. The leveraged buying power of the RTE population is realized here. The efficient deployment of unique and proprietary brand elements to the field organization and Retail and Product brands. Business Operating Systems module 125 includes the hardware and software that allows automation, efficiency, and dynamic response to enable the business environment of Independent Retailers at the store level.
- FIG. 3 is a schematic system diagram of one embodiment of the invention. The general network of the Internet will be used, however, access will typically be limited, e.g., by password and user i.d. or other conventional security methods. Such systems are taught, e.g., in U.S. Patent No. 6,038,597, issued Mar. 14, 2000, entitled "Method And Apparatus For Providing And Accessing Data At An Internet Site," assigned to Dell U.S.A., L.P., which is

incorporated herein by reference in its entirety. This is because typically only authorized retail store and their suppliers should have access to the system. The public will not have such access typically.

FIG. 4 is a schematic block system level 0 flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the invention. After logging in at block 205, the user selects a service in block 210. One or more of the services may be selected. The diagram shows one embodiment where each service is connected with all other services. Other embodiments include each other possible variation on interconnections between services, e.g., the Customer Service System 235 is accessible from any other service, but the Communities System 225 is only accessible from the select service block 210. The interconnectivity adds value to the user in ease of transfer to a needed service at the right time.

The available services includes Brand Deployment System 215, IR Marketplace System 220, Communities (also referenced as "Messages") System 225, Business Operating Systems System 230, and Customer Service System 235.

Brand deployment system 215 includes promotions deployment and other brand deployment, e.g., headquarters branded credit card programs, customer satisfaction services, e.g., anonymous inspections, loan programs, and facility improvement programs. Promotions typically include limited time period special sales of merchandise, e.g., 2 for 1. Special advertising materials for placement around the retail store are typically included. Transactions records are typically maintained for promotions ordered and other orders, order status and history. Communities include topic-specific newsgroups, clubs, and bulletin boards..

Customer service includes telephonic and online assistance with any retail store matter and especially use of the system of the invention. Operations support includes, e.g., uniform supplies, dumpster service, and facility

cleaning services. Education support is optionally available in one embodiment which includes online courses and catalogs for ordering written or video materials on matters important to the retail store's success, e.g., hiring and retention, training, cleaning, and retailing know-how. The various
5 above-described subsystems of the inventions and examples of each subsystem are only exemplary and are not meant to be limiting. In some embodiments some or all of the subsystems might be renamed, combined, or further divided, yet still be within the invention.

Communication occurs over network including a client-server environment
10 including the Internet, an extranet, a wide area network, a metropolitan area network, and mixtures thereof. Typically, an extranet will be utilized. That is, the general network of the Internet will typically be used, however, access will be limited, e.g., by password and user i.d. or other conventional security methods. Such systems are taught, e.g., in U.S. Patent No. 6,038,597,
15 issued Mar. 14, 2000, entitled "Method And Apparatus For Providing And Accessing Data At An Internet Site," assigned to Dell U.S.A., L.P., which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety. This is because typically only authorized stores in the retail store's chain and their suppliers should have access to the system. The public will not have such access typically.

20 FIG. 5A is a schematic block process flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the Brand Deployment aspect of the invention.

FIG. 5B is a schematic block process flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the promotions aspect of the Brand Deployment aspect of the invention. An IR retail store. Promotions are displayed in block 510. The user optionally
25 selects at least one promotion in block 515, and orders the promotion in block 520. Order fulfillment occurs in block 525. Conventional shopping cart or other known eCommerce ordering systems may be use as taught, e.g., in U.S. Patent Nos. 5,960,411 entitled "Method And System For Placing A Purchase Order Via A Communications Network" and 6,029,142 entitled

"Electronic Catalog System And Method," and in Baron, Chris and Bob Weil, "Implementing a Web Shopping Cart," Dr. Dobbs's Journal, Sep. 1996, pp. 64, 66, 68-69, and 83-85, which are each incorporated herein by reference in their entireties. The supplier receives the order and fulfills the order in block

5 Embodiments include where the order message is transmitted directly from the retail store to the supplier or, alternatively, where the order is transmitted to the headquarters, who then passes it on directly to the supplier or optionally first combines it with like orders from other retail stores prior to passing it on to the supplier.

10 Conventional secure transaction systems are optionally utilized as taught, e.g., in U.S. Patent No. 5,949,876, issued Sep. 7, 1999, entitled "Systems And Methods For Secure Transaction Management And Electronic Rights Protection," assigned to InterTrust Technologies Corporation, which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

15 FIG. 6 is a schematic block system flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the Marketplace aspect of the invention. An eCatalog is searched in step 610, optionally using conventional eCatalog technology, e.g., as available from Requisite Technologies Inc. Conventional shopping cart or other known eCommerce ordering systems may be use as taught in the Brand Deployment

20 System description above.

Transaction records and history are optionally stored and accessible to each customer for specific business transaction records such as invoicing, shipment, payment history and price notifications. The transaction history optionally can also track transactions that were not entered into over the

25 system, e.g., conventional purchasing methods, i.e., standing orders.

Shipment tracking and payment processing are optional features of the Transaction sub-system. Shipment tracking processes may optionally be implemented with known systems, e.g., as taught in U.S. Patent No.

5,960,408, issued Sep. 28, 1999, entitled "On-Time Delivery, Tracking And Reporting," which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

- FIG. 7 is a schematic block system flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the Customer Service aspect of the invention. The user displays and selects
- 5 contact methods in block 705. Then for each contact method, online contact in block 710 or telephone contact in block 730, the user sends/states an inquiry, blocks 715 and 735, the inquiry is handled by the customer service center, blocks 720 and 740, and the user receives a response to the inquiry, blocks 725 and 745.
- 10 This subsystem, in one embodiment allows the user to enter real-time communications between any of the stores and a customer service representative of said headquarters, and wherein said steps for communication can be entered into during any step of said brand promotion deployment method.
- 15 The Customer Services aspect/subsystem of the invention will provide the human touch that enables the transformation of the Independent Retailer and is the problem solver, business consultant, and partner in an increasingly automated, e-driven environment. All users of the system will have access to the Customer Services subsystem either on-line, by way of telephone, or
- 20 both. On-site customer service is optionally provided.

The services provided by the Customer Services subsystem optionally include user training, troubleshooting, help desk functions, and account history records. Preferably, the subsystem includes functions for tracking customer interactions whereby the customer service representative can quickly pull up

25 the interaction record, e.g., as taught in U.S. Patent Nos. 6,014,647 entitled "Customer interaction tracking" and 6,032,184 entitled "Integrated Interface For Web Based Customer Care And Trouble Management", which references are incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

Optionally, the frame on each screen will include a Customer Service button, or other selection means, whereby the user may at any time select the button to launch an email window for sending inquiries to Customer Service. For the suppliers, Customer Service optionally includes a targeted advertising campaign service for suppliers' goods, services and/or promotions. The Customer Services subsystem, and optionally one or more of each other subsystem in one embodiment includes feedback functions, whereby retail store employees may provide feedback to headquarters about any aspect of the system, e.g., success of or problems with a promotion, suggested improvements, or implementation or operating difficulties.

FIG. 8 is a schematic block system flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the Business Operating Systems aspect of the invention. Hosted business applications are displayed in step 805. Conventional and proprietary application service provider ("ASP") technology is available from a variety of companies, e.g., Quest Cyber.Solutions Inc.

FIG. 9A is a schematic block system flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the Communities/Messages aspect of the invention. FIG. 9B is a schematic block system flow chart diagram of one embodiment of the Existing Communities System of the Communities/Messages aspect of the invention. As shown in Figure 9A, a user at a retail store enters Select Community System block 550. There the user selects one or more subsystems from the options which in one embodiment include Existing Communities System 555 and Create New Communities System 560. Figure 5B depicts steps in one embodiment of the Existing Communities System. The user displays community types in block 505, enters a community in block 510, optionally interacts in the community in block 515, and then closes/exits the community in block 520.

FIG 9C illustrates the display of a web page, typically a home page, showing typical components for creating the Community. In one embodiment, each

customer wishing to utilize the brand deployment system may have a customized communities page for viewing by their stores. The components of the page are, in one embodiment, a News and Information section 570, a What's New section 565, and a Features section 580. Menu bar 575 in one embodiment is displayed on many if not all web pages. One skilled in the art would appreciate that these various sections can be omitted or rearranged or adapted in various ways. News and Information section 570, and optionally other sections, in one embodiment has drill down features, e.g., buttons which when clicked upon opens another panel displaying past news and information features and/or each current news and information feature has an associated hyperlink to a page which elaborates on that current news feature.

The Communities aspect/subsystem (also referenced as Messages system or subsystem) of the invention will provide the fun, dynamic, interactive participant driven element that facilitates ideas, discussion and partnership with other members of the community, i.e., headquarters, retail chain stores and optionally their suppliers, distributors, and suppliers. The Communities subsystem will include topic-specific newsgroups, member-clubs, bulletin boards, and other on-line community features. This component will be very flexible, e.g., users can participate in an existing user group or create a new one. The groups may use secure on non-secure communications. All participants in the system may access the communities component. It may be used for collaborative planning, design and development of promotions, products, and/or services. The Communities sub-system is optionally utilized for consumer research and feedback to a particular IR chain's headquarters and/or the manufacturers/distributors.

FIG. 10 is a block system diagram showing one preferred embodiment of specific applications/implementations and their interrelationship. The products and brand components shown in Fig. 10 are for illustrative purposes only. Other brands and architectural embodiments may be used in

implementing the method and system of the inventions as will be understood by those skilled in the art.

The web site for the system includes conventional web site development considerations known to experienced web site developers. Such

- 5 considerations include content, content clearing, presentation of content, architecture, database linking, external web site linking, number of pages, overall size and storage requirements, maintainability, access speed, use of graphics, choice of metatags to facilitate hits, privacy considerations, and disclaimers.
- 10 Optionally, a test environment is used prior to deployment of the production system. In the test environment, the web site is loaded into an isolated test environment for debugging and for other test purposes. A piloting step is also optionally utilized (it may also be called an alpha and/or beta testing step/means. In the pilot step, the system is internally test marketed.
- 15 The piloting step/means optionally includes formally or informally gathering feedback from the internal users of the web site for use in improving and debugging the site and for use in planning the marketing step. The tenant-leasing step/means includes identifying potential tenants, e.g., petroleum industry vendors or customers, and contacting them to lease space on the
- 20 web site, i.e., to offer for sale their goods and services and/or agree to procure goods or services through the web site. Signing such outside companies may also be necessary to complete testing in the test environment and in pilot testing.